

Someone Who is Not Like Anyone

Ebrahim Bagheri Zadeh

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Abstract

This paper is in the support of the Thesis Exhibition, *Someone Who Is Not Like Anyone*, which includes artworks in ballpoint pen and watercolors. In the exhibition, I explore the different moods of masculinity that I observed and sought to inhabit while in the closet in Iran but which I ultimately rejected. In the process, I recreate for the viewer the aesthetics/experiences of closeted men. The paper explores how art, under various circumstances, has been a savior in my life. During the years I grew up in the homophobic Middle Eastern culture, art was my survival tool and the hope for my future, my strength in my weakest moments, my confidence whenever I encountered fear, and my best friend at all times. This paper is an overview of the development of my artistic growth throughout the closeted years to the coming out years. In this paper, I divide my artistic life into different chapters: childhood; teen years; artistic discovery; immigration and thesis exhibition. This process has gradually moved from private to public, as well as from fear to confidence.

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*Ay, age seven
Ay, the magnanimous moment of departure
Whatever happened after you,
happened in a mesh of insanity and ignorance.*

*After you,
the window which was a lively and bright connection
between the bird and us
between the breeze and us
broke
broke
broke
after you,
that earthly doll which did not utter a thing,
nothing but water
water
water
drowned
in water.*

*After you,
we killed the cricket's voice
we became lured
by the bell ring rising off of the letters of the alphabet
and the whistling of the arms factory.*

*After you, where our playground was beneath the desk
we graduated from beneath the desks
to behind the desks
and from behind the desks
to top of the desks
and we played on top of the desks
and lost
we lost your color
Aah, age seven.*

*After you,
we betrayed each other
after you,
we cleansed your memories
by lead particles and splattered blood-drops
off of the plastered temples of alley walls.*

*after you
we went to the squares*

*and shouted:
'long live...
and down with...'¹*

Age Seven, Forough Farrokhzad

Section One: Childhood

As far as I can remember, art, in all its forms, has been a saving grace in my life. At an early age I realized I was different from my brother and other boys I was around. I often felt an outsider in their world. I had no interest in cars or motorbikes and usually spent my time studying the colors of flowers, the curves of a face and the texture of fabrics. I was captivated with the way colors blend from one to another or the way shapes changed, especially the way a human face changed with each different expression. I would sit and stare at people's faces, trying to remember the way the eyes, cheeks, nose, lips, chin and eyebrows moved, shifting from one emotion to another.

Unlike other kids of my age I never drew the sun rising from behind mountains, or the river running below it. Instead, I drew men. I painted the boys of my neighborhood. Sometimes they would be kicking a soccer ball and at other times sitting in exhaustion from a day of play. Other times I drew the boys that I only knew from my imagination. Drawing the male form was automatic for me. I never knew why I drew it, but I knew I had to draw their faces, limbs, and languid bodies into existence. I was addicted. I drew from day to night and turned to paint to flesh out the men I drew. I had no interest in playing with other kids of my age. My companions were the boys I created. I was lucky that I was applauded and encouraged to work more, and so I continued drawing the boys.

When I joined school, the boys of my imagination were replaced by the boys in my class. Like

¹ Farrokhzad, F., "Age Seven", trans. Leila Farjami.. *foroughfarrokhzad.org*. <http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks7.php#age> (accessed: March 28, 2017)

the boys who played in my neighborhood, I did not fit in with them. I was neither the jock, nor the nerd, but an odd category for a boy, *an artist*. My art was perceived as strange by my peers and my private pleasure and solace became a public liability. When I look back as an adult, I can see how I struggled with this tension between my private love and the social pressures that craft a person's public image. I remember the intrusive questions: *Who are you drawing? Why do you only draw boys?* Even though they did not ask, I believe that what they really wanted to know was why I was only interested in drawing masculine figures. Although these questions never got answered, they lingered for a long time and haunted my drawings. Being afraid I would not be able to answer such questions, I began contemplating how I would start drawing feminine figures as well.

Around the age of eight, I put away my drawings of boys playing and began to focus on the far more acceptable subject of female beauty. I painted beautiful women and was appreciated for it. Society prefers to gaze at women so I made sure to never cause anxiety by turning the eye of desire to the beauty of a man. But it was not just social anxiety about the objectification of men; it was my own anxiety at desiring male beauty. Drawing the female form had an additional benefit. Not only did it keep people's questions at bay but suddenly, I had a purpose for the boys of my age. I knew how to draw the body of a woman, a body that the Iranian regime kept veiled and hidden. In my teens, I painted nude women in erotic poses for my male peers. The limbs and flesh that had been threatening when they belonged to a male subject became the stuff of dreams when they belonged to women. When I was young, I found a strange acceptance by my peers. Now when I look back, I see that it was a compromise.

Women saved my life, not only as subjects to be drawn and shared but also as creative artists who offered me beauty and hope and none more so than the feminist Iranian poet of the modern Persian verse, Forough Farrokhzad. Persian poetry has always been a part of my life. It is a cliché, but true nevertheless, that Iranians love their poets and they love their poetry. It is not surprising that poetry intersected with my art throughout my youth and into my adult years.

Growing up as the youngest child in an upper middle class household, I was fortunate to be surrounded by people who appreciated poetry and recited it at home. I remember how every spring, at the start of the Iranian new year, we would set a table with all the usual things that accompanied a *Noruz* table; an apple, a goldfish, a mirror, some vinegar, fresh green sprigs, a clove of garlic, some sumac and the anthology of the fourteenth century poet, Hafez Shirazi. Each year, we would open the book to a poem upon which we would reflect. We were supposed to take an omen or a sign from it. One year it opened to his famous verse:

*If that Turk of Shiraz were to take my heart in his hand,
For his Hindu mole, I would grant him Samarkand and Bukhara.²*

The homoeroticism in these lines struck me and I began thinking about the world I was living in (the closet), and the connection between the poem and my cultural world. How had he managed to successfully introduce an art charged with homoeroticism into a setting that was less open than mine? If the classical poets offered me questions, the contemporary feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad gave me courage and inspired me to live my truth. I began to read her works at the age of ten. Of course, a lot of what she wrote about, patriarchy, loneliness, heartbreak, existed as vague concepts for me, but the power of poetry struck a chord. She used words like paint, mixing them together and flinging them on paper to create evocative images. As I grew older, it made more sense to me why I was drawn to her verses of alienation, of secrets, of emotional pain, and heartbreak. I was in a closet and she was in a cage.

*More than this, yes
more than this one can stay silent.*

*With a fixed gaze like
that of the dead
one can stare for long hours
at the smoke rising from a cigarette
at the shape of a cup*

² Wheeler M. Thackston, ed., *A Millennium of Classical Persian Poetry* (Bethesda, MA: Ibex, 1994), 64.

*at a faded flower on the rug
at a fading slogan on the wall.*

*One can draw back the drapes
with wrinkled fingers and watch
rain falling heavy in the alley
a child standing in a doorway holding colorful kites
a rickety cart leaving the deserted square
in a noisy rush*

*One can stand motionless
by the drapes—blind, deaf.*

*One can cry out
with a voice quite false, quite remote
“I love...”³
The Wind-up Doll, Forough Farrokhzad*

Section Two: The Teen Years

As a closeted teen boy I always felt lonely, useless, and hollow. I had a mixture of feeling shame, guilt and fear that created walls around me. I was someone who was like no one. I felt guilty of hiding the truth, and this guilt was growing in me every day. The saddest part of closeted life is the long internal battle that one can never get over; the identity conflict. The conflict is between dominant ideologies and social values — and the inner feelings that deep down one cannot accept but somehow must adapt to this circumstance. Another aspect of closeted life is when one slowly starts to be separated from society and slowly gets used to the loneliness. I feel my closeted life separated me from being an active member of society. I often stayed home, drew and painted quietly and read poetry on an everyday basis. I grew up with the fear that the truth about me, that I was gay, would be revealed. I feared humiliation and punishment. Therefore, I adopted a guarded, public version of myself behind which was a naïve, hopeless child filled with fear, guilt and shame.

³ Farrokhzad, F., “The Wind-up Doll”, trans. Almad Karimi-Hakka.
foroughfarrokhzad.org. <http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks3.php#thewindup>
(accessed March 28, 2017).

As an artist, I believe my closeted life and self-censorship was ultimately an important source of creative energy. In some ways I value the years of isolation I suffered, although while living through it I didn't feel that way. As time has passed, I realize that my ability to observe the world has developed during this period.

*All day, all day,
Forsaken, forsaken like a corpse on water,
I floated towards the most terrifying rocks,
Toward the deepest sea caves.
And the most carnivorous of fish
And the thin vertebrae of my back
twinged with pain at sending death.*

*I couldn't any longer; I just couldn't.
The sound of my feet arose from the denial of the road,
And my despair had become vaster than my spirit's capacity to endure.
And that spring season and that green-colored delusion
Passing by the window said to my heart:
You never progressed,
Yours has been a descent."⁴
The Green delusion, Forough Farrokhzad*

Throughout my teen years up to today, I feel a significant connection with Forough Farrokhzad's poetry. In *Green Delusion*, Farrokhzad describes herself as if the desperation captivated her soul and there isn't anything that could help her. That is exactly what I felt. Her influence showed me that my feelings of depression could take on another life through creative expression. By finding a form to communicate my personal experience – such as shame and isolation – through art, a process of transformation began. I continued to draw obsessively on anything; books, notebooks, magazines, walls, anything, anywhere. Similar to the depiction in “Green Delusion,” I was a captive of my domestic territory. Inside, behind closed doors, deep in my own world, I could

⁴ Farrokhzad, F., excerpt from “The Green Delusion”, trans. Michael Hillmann. [foroughfarrokhzad.org. http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks4_old.php](http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks4_old.php) (accessed March 28, 2017)

hear kids playing outside. I could see the blue sky beyond the curtains, but I was not able to simply open the door and engage with others. This was the aesthetics of isolation and loneliness that truly connected me to myself and led me to a stage of self-recognition. The power of art completely took over my life, I could not function without it. Drawing and painting for me, was not simply mark making on a surface or creating images. It was about the profound connection between my visual experiences, my observations and my feelings that were coming out of my heart. Art became my savior as I was passing through the darkest moments of my life. The conflict and isolation made me a stronger artist, but also a person who has sympathy and can feel the pain of others.

*I am sending-
my warmest greetings to the sun,
and to the tender rivers that streamed in my veins,
and to the raining clouds that forever carried- my endless dreams-
to the other side.*

*Also,
my greetings go-
to the poplar trees in the yard-
and their sore but graceful aging-
under the comes and goes of sun:
They escorted me in all chilly visits-
of dry times.*

*And,
I am sending my greetings to the dark crowd of crows:
They always brought me the refreshing scent of nightly crops.*

*And,
my greetings go to my mother-
who stayed and lived in the mirror,
and looked like my aged face.*

*And my greetings to this earth, this generous earth-
that the thrill of repeating me, filled its aroused inside- with countless greening
seeds.⁵
I Will Greet The Sun Again, Forough Farrokhzad*

Section Three: Artistic Discovery

As far as I can remember, except for the years prior to school, I had to work with my alter-ego to keep up with the dominant expectation of masculinity in my environment. This long internal battle of keeping the “standards” exhausted me throughout my early years. I became someone who I wasn’t. I even remember being homophobic to hide my sexuality. I had to be extra cautious with my body language and choice of words in public. My hands were always in my

⁵ Farrokhzad, F., “I Will Greet the Sun Again”, trans. Maryam Dilmaghani.
<https://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/forough-farrokhzad/i-will-greet-the-sun-again/>. (accessed March 28, 2017).

pocket to hide my gestures. I had to be emotionless and tough to present myself as masculine or overly masculine. But how could I keep up with all of these misrepresentations and internal frustrations? The answer is I couldn't. As I was growing older, I was becoming more aware. I had read many inspirational poems of Rumi that he dedicated to Shams-e Tabrizi. Although Rumi's sexuality was never confirmed, many people believed Rumi and Tabrizi were more than just close friends. From a gay perspective, it's hard not to interpret their poems as a love story between men. These classical poets/poems allowed me to realize that love, desire, loss, conflict, were acceptable emotions, which for me, happened to be emotions related to other men.

I may call my teenage years the years of fear and darkness but I call my late teen years and early twenties the age of my enlightenment. I began to educate myself about gay men. I acknowledged the existence of homosexuals in society. Some were like me and acted overly masculine while others seemed to give up the duality and present themselves freely. The classical poets such as Hafez Shirazi and Rumi, as well as the existence of a large underground gay community I discovered in Tehran, took away the shame.

Acknowledgement of the normality of homosexuality was the biggest influence in my artistic practice. Prior to that, the mediums I had developed were ballpoint pen and charcoal. My little "boredom" ballpoint pen drawings as well as my overly dark, unclear, ambiguous charcoal drawings turned into colorful, celebratory pastel portraits of men. Men were no longer hidden in my work. The visible/invisible conflict within Iranian culture, which I found to be characteristic of homosexual life in my country, brought me to the idea of representing something that is supposed to be invisible although it is pretty much visible

My early work during this transitional stage consisted of bold color pastel figures and portraits of men. I obsessively practiced drawing with pastels throughout my late teen years into my early twenties. I wanted to show the life of the colorful boys I encountered in Iran. My work focused on the kinds of relationships between men from everyday social contacts to what could be

observed as simple friendships along with private romances.

Homosexuality in Iran is a crime and there is no social, political or cultural support for the gay community. A closeted gay person may intend to break the isolation by getting involved with the gay community, but in reality, this community without any kind of support is a larger closet itself. In other words, both closeted and out gays experience a traumatic life. The closeted gay man deals with misery, shame, and a dual life, while the out gay man faces punishment, humiliation, and possibly the death penalty. To some degree, I experienced both sides of this trauma and felt I had no choice but to leave everything behind and move to a different country.

A new chapter of my life began with my move from Iran to Turkey. While I was living in Turkey, I developed an observational eye for anything associated with homosexuality that I could include in my art. I had already experienced closeted life in an oppressive society, but in Turkey, the act of homosexuality is not criminalized. There was cultural and moral support for the gay community which was a new experience for me.

The openness and acceptance of this new society I was living in pushed me towards a greater freedom of expression. Fear was replaced with a new confidence in mark making and with a medium new to me; watercolor. The joy and playfulness of working with watercolor allowed me to be more relaxed in the way I created images. It was a new chapter, a new medium and a new understanding of what or how I could draw.

Watercolor is a wet medium that requires a mixture of water and color pigment. It also requires specific watercolor brushes and paper that absorbs the water and leaves the pigment or stain behind. Unlike ballpoint, pastel or charcoal drawings that can be done in one session, water color allows the artist to create layers of mark making. Once the first coat is dry, it is ready to be painted over. One of the key elements that attracted me to this delicate medium is the soft, dreamy and

unreal effects it can create. To me, it is a perfect medium, since the transparency allows the viewer to see the layers underneath just as a closeted person tries to hide but their existence is notable. Throughout the years, watercolor has been one of my favorite mediums and I have developed a cohesive body of work by mixing watercolor with other mediums such as ballpoint pen and colored pencil.

*In the land of dwarfs, scales are small,
Why shall I mind, why?*

*Don't you see?
I act upon roots of Truth
And the constitution of my soul
overruled the bounded jurisdiction of the blind.*

*Don't tell me about the lengthy, wild, howls-
and about the pitiful genitals of animals!*

*Don't tell me about the sorry twist of worms-
in the emptiness of limbs!*

*Legacy of martyred flowers committed me to life,
Legacy of martyred flowers,
Don't you see?⁶
The Only Sound Will Last, Forough Farrokhad*

Section Four: Immigration

One of the key elements in my formation as an artist is my immigration to Canada. The journey became more than just a relocation or a geographical move. Moving away from a place where I was not able to express myself, to a place where I could have freedom of expression was liberating. This move was a part of my growth as a person but especially as an artist. While in

⁶ Farrokhzad, F., "Only the Sound Will Last", trans. Maryam Dilmaghani.
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/only-the-sound-will-last/>. (accessed March 28, 2017).

Canada, I've had the opportunity to take courses in art and more importantly to talk about myself through my work. On my educational journey, from George Brown College to OCAD university, I developed a body of work that was not in response to anything but my internal frustration from the years I suffered by hiding in the darkness. As I progressed in art, I came closer to self-recognition and to a sense of peace within myself. At first it wasn't easy, since I had existed as an artist who lived a double life, hid the truth, wore a mask, and was extremely private. In Canada, I had the chance to talk not only about myself but also to acknowledge others who lived through similar circumstances. By living in a tolerant environment, the shame and guilt were replaced with confidence and acceptance.

By the end of my education at OCAD University, I decided to come out of the closet during a public event; my graduate exhibition in 2013, called *The Eastern Desire*. The exhibition was a series of self-portraits illustrating me topless, in contact with other topless men in classical Persian motifs. I incorporated a rooster in the images, which for me, signifies the male, ego, anger and domestication. *The Eastern Desire* was in response to the cultural paradox of visual and literary Persian art, such as Persian miniatures that depict heterosexual love stories and the homoerotic poetry of Rumi and Hafez Shirazi. Persian miniatures often illustrate a love story between men and women in a surreal, dreamy environment. Although there is no proof of Rumi's sexuality, his love and dedication to Shams-e Tabrizi, and more importantly, the gender-neutral verbs he used in his poems, are suggestive of a love story between two men. In the exhibition, *Eastern Desire No. 1*, Image 1, I illustrated an updated version of a Persian miniature with the presence of love, especially love between men.



Image 1, The Eastern Desire, 48 by 96 inches, 203

In my practice, portraits have never been about representational beauty. In fact, portraiture has always been an ambiguous way of opening up a dialogue about truth; about seeing and observing

peoples' emotion beyond their looks. In a similar approach that many poets such as Forough Farrokhzad have used, I reference everyday objects that surround us. I have included objects, animals, birds, fish, seahorses, flowers and fruit in my drawings to make a bridge between the private, domestic sphere and the public arena.

At an early stage of this development in my work, the purpose of their existence was mainly decorative and my use of this kind of imagery was intuitive. As I developed a body of work, I became more aware of the connotations associated with roosters, snails, hibiscus flowers and various other plants and animals. I used them as a metaphor for the feelings of desire and anger. Roosters announce the day, are noisy, unpopular, angry and associated with men, power and masculinity. Roosters cannot be fully domesticated but are powerless when forced to participate in the sport of Cock Fighting, since humans control, manipulate and encourage the fight. Throughout my closeted life, I have always likened myself to a rooster; angry, frustrated and powerless.

Another example of how I have used animal life in my practice is the artwork *The Snail and I*, Image 2. In my practice, snails refer to sexual desire and the seeking and hiding of self. For me snails stand for a protective shell that hide an inner life. In this work I am alluding to the open secret and visible relationships between men who still must try to hide.

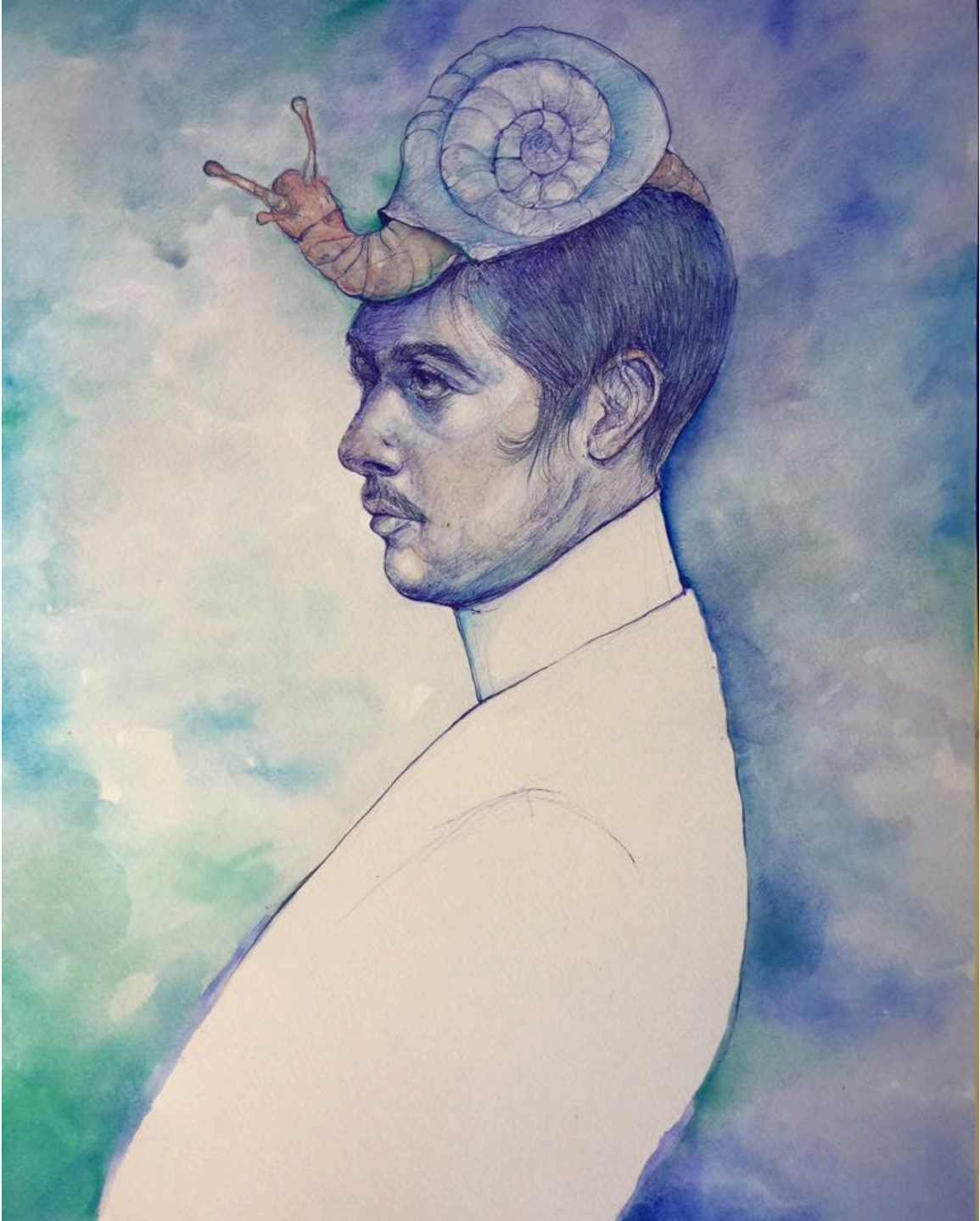


Image 2, The Snail And I, 18 by 34 inches, 2017

*I've had a dream that someone is coming.
I've dreamt of a red star,
and my eyes lids keep twitching
and my shoes keep snapping to attention
and may I go blind
if I'm lying.
I've dreamt of that red star
when I wasn't asleep.
Someone is coming,
someone is coming
someone better,*

*someone who is like no one,
not like Father,
not like Ensi,
not like Yahya
not like Mother,
and is like the person who he ought to be.
and his height is greater than the trees
around the overseer's house,
and his face is brighter
than the face of the mahdi,
and he's not even afraid
Of Sayyed Javad's brother
who has gone
and put on a policeman's uniform.
and he's not even afraid of Sayyed Javad himself
who owns all the rooms of our house.⁷
Someone Who Is Like No One, Forough Farrokhzad*

Section Five: Thesis Exhibition

“Someone Who Is Like No One” is one of the well-known poems of Forough Farrokhzad, written prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In this poem, Farrokhzad is expecting someone to arrive and bring justice. I have adapted this title for my Thesis Exhibition, *Someone Who is Not Like Anyone*, an exhibition where I revisit the experiences and emotions of my closeted years. In this

⁷ Farrokhzad, F., “Someone Who is Like No One”, trans. Maryam Dilmaghani.
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/someone-who-is-like-no-one/>. (accessed March 28, 2017).

project, I continue to explore such binaries as public and private, visibility and invisibility and the notion of secrecy and hiding. Even though the artwork in *Someone Who Is Not Like Anyone* comes from personal and private feelings, I am interested in connecting with those who have experienced a similar drama in their lives and have had no voice to express themselves. The exhibition consists of approximately 14 drawings in ballpoint pen, watercolor or mixed media. I draw myself in both contemporary and historical contexts to show the alienation of homosexuals throughout history (in Iran); and I have brought historical Persian motifs into my work, not only to emphasize this issue in Middle Eastern culture, but also to remember or pay homage to the queers of the past.

Throughout my practice, I have developed a body of work using a variety of mediums — such as, wet mediums like watercolor, oil and acrylic paint, as well as dry mediums, such as pastel, charcoal, colored pencil and ball point pen. My surfaces have included canvas, papers such as Stonehenge, Fabriano, printmaking papers, cardboard, illustration board, as well as Mylar. Each surface, depending on the weight, texture, and color allows for a specific kind of mark making. For instance, I use Stonehenge paper because its rough texture allows me to create a whole range of tonal values. For this exhibition I am using mostly white Stonehenge paper but I have also used colored surfaces to add warmth to the drawings. For instance *Mug Shot/Madonna*, Image 5 is drawn on grey illustration board because the blue ball-point pen works well with the grey tone and the smooth surface creates delicate marks. Mylar, a smooth, thin plastic sheet requires a different technical skill in articulating marks but I use it for its' transparency since the wall can be seen through the drawing. The accumulation of many years of practice has made me a flexible artist capable of shifting from one medium to another, as well as of combining mediums to create mixed media artworks. Each medium in my practice is reminiscent of an era of my life. During each stage, I have concentrated on developing a technical aspect of my practice. One of the first mediums I ever used was the ballpoint pen which I have returned to for my thesis exhibition.

The ballpoint pen was a tool I often thought of; its functionality in literature is as a tool which

writers and poets used to create literary work. I always wondered how I could use it the way Forough Farrokhzad used it to talk about her life. The act of using a ballpoint pen for the purpose of art is different from using traditional art tools such as a brush or pastels. Art mediums suggest a studio environment and professional practice, while, for me, the use of a ballpoint pen is an expression of boredom and loneliness. A ballpoint pen for me is the medium of alienation and the feeling of not fitting with the environment. I recall the moments of my closeted life in my school years, when I had nothing but a ballpoint pen to engage with. Sketching obsessively with this tool involved more than drawing shapes and cast shadows; it became the medium that allowed me to connect to myself.

There are many kinds of pens now available in art supply stores that have been designed for art purposes. However, I prefer the common school or office blue Bic ballpoint pen. It has faded, delicate ink that allows me to create drawings with line, depth, and effective shadows through cross-hatching. In the artwork, *Alienation*, Image3, drawn with blue and red ballpoint, my intention was to create a moment of intimacy; a moment of four figures positioned in a representation of supporting one another. The four figures are actually one individual who has developed other characters for comfort and emotional support. I decided to not include any background in order to create a scene of loneliness. To create instability, I have the figures standing on something that isn't visible. This work is about isolation. The red marking on the eyes, hands and noses and the white, hospital-like background are intended to create a sense of discomfort. We all keep our distance and avoid physical contact with people who are potentially contagious, ill, or just different.

In Middle Eastern culture, and Iran in particular, there is an absence of personal space. For instance, a complete stranger might come and stand extremely close by, or might ask many personal questions. In this kind of scene, any avoidance in responding may cause conflict or suspicion. This culture of intrusion is something that has pushed many people, especially gays, to

live a dual life. I drew *Alienation* on large-scale paper partially rolled and not visible to the public. By doing so, I wanted to raise the curiosity of the viewer, and invite them to step back in order to have a good view of the artwork. Creating space between the drawing and the viewer is meant to suggest a (social) space for homosexuals to live their lives.



Image 3, *The Alienation*, 48 by 96 inches, 2016

In the exhibition, my imagery includes headshots, portraits or self-portraits and mug shots similar to those used in police investigations. In *Old Man* Image 4, my intention was to portray the complex identity of people who could never come out of the closet. I often think about and revisit my closeted years, which were full of fear and anguish, to help me appreciate the tolerance I have today. I also think of those who lived in the closet for many years because of their circumstances, afraid of humiliation, discrimination and, of course, the death penalty. Many

closeted gay men in Iran, eventually get married and inhabit the dominant expectations of society. In *Old Man*, I intended to portray an older man who appears not to fit with the stereotypical image of a closeted gay man, but in fact is someone who has aged in the closet. Although this portrait is imaginary, the sadness in his eyes is a response to many old, closeted individuals I have observed in my life. I incorporated an outmoded Middle Eastern hat and checkered scarf commonly used by mountain shepherds. With this portrait, I am pointing to the diverse experiences of the gay men.

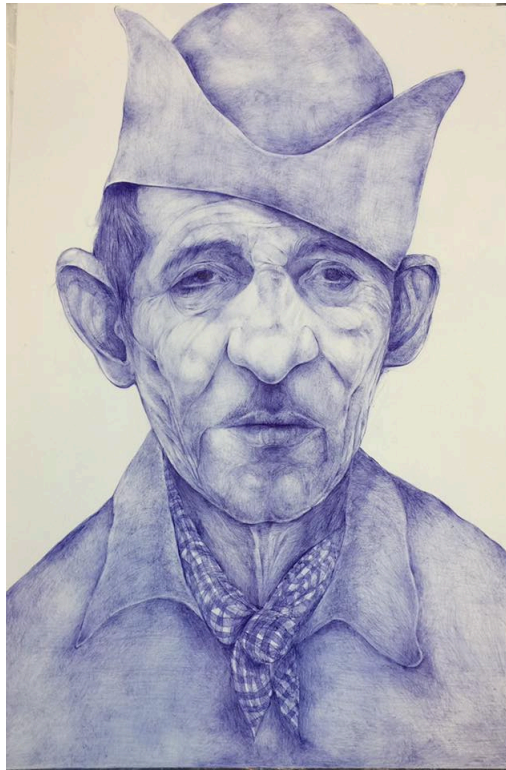


Image 4, *The Old Man*, 36 by 48 inches, 2017

I have also used the format of a mug shot to suggest the criminality of homosexual acts. In the diptych, *Mug Shot/Madonna*, there is a profile of the subject, and a frontal portrait of the man holding a rooster, which I have included to signify maleness. In this portrait, I have referenced the gestures found in Byzantium paintings of Madonna and Child. The rooster is held with care, close to the heart. The man gazes at the viewer and there is no expression of shame or regret.



Image 5, The Mug Shot/Madonna, 48 by 48 inches, 2017

Conclusion

Our perception and the meaning of everything change as we grow by our life experiences, social and political changes, geographical travel and education. For instance, the understanding of homosexuality has shifted and become more accepted in the past few decades.

In my work, I've tried to explore sexual desire in a way that is not a cliché. My intention is to imply the validity of intimacy or connection between two souls, rather than promoting the provocation of the sexual act.

In the early stage of my queer art, I started drawing with bold pastels and subsequently began to explore watercolors. At first I intended to illustrate cliché portraits of gay men who were comfortably out. Considering that the validation of the homosexual existence was at that time, fairly new to me, I wanted to make a statement about our existence in society. However, as time has passed, I have moved the boundaries beyond stereotypical portraits of gays. For instance, in the artwork, *Hibiscus and I* Image 6, I revisit my experiences as both a gay man and as an artist.

In this drawing include some aspects of my former work such as the use of a flower. However I

have created a believable shirt with a hibiscus pattern because I am not only representing a gay man, I am also showing a man whose sexuality is not the main point of his identity. The mark making is a circular drawing motion I use to create light and dark shadows across the shirt in the area of his heart. I wanted to bring more drama through the use of light and dark values and to tone down the shirt pattern. For this composition the figure is not posed, but caught in a momentary gesture that suggests neither sadness, nor happiness. Instead it suggests a person immersed in thought or self-reflection.

In many of my works I engage the viewer with a direct gaze, external decorative elements such as a bowtie, cherry earring or rooster as a way to make what is supposed to be invisible, visible. In the my most recent works I have toned down these elements, not only to avoid visual cliché, but also to represent humanity and a person that might or might not be gay.

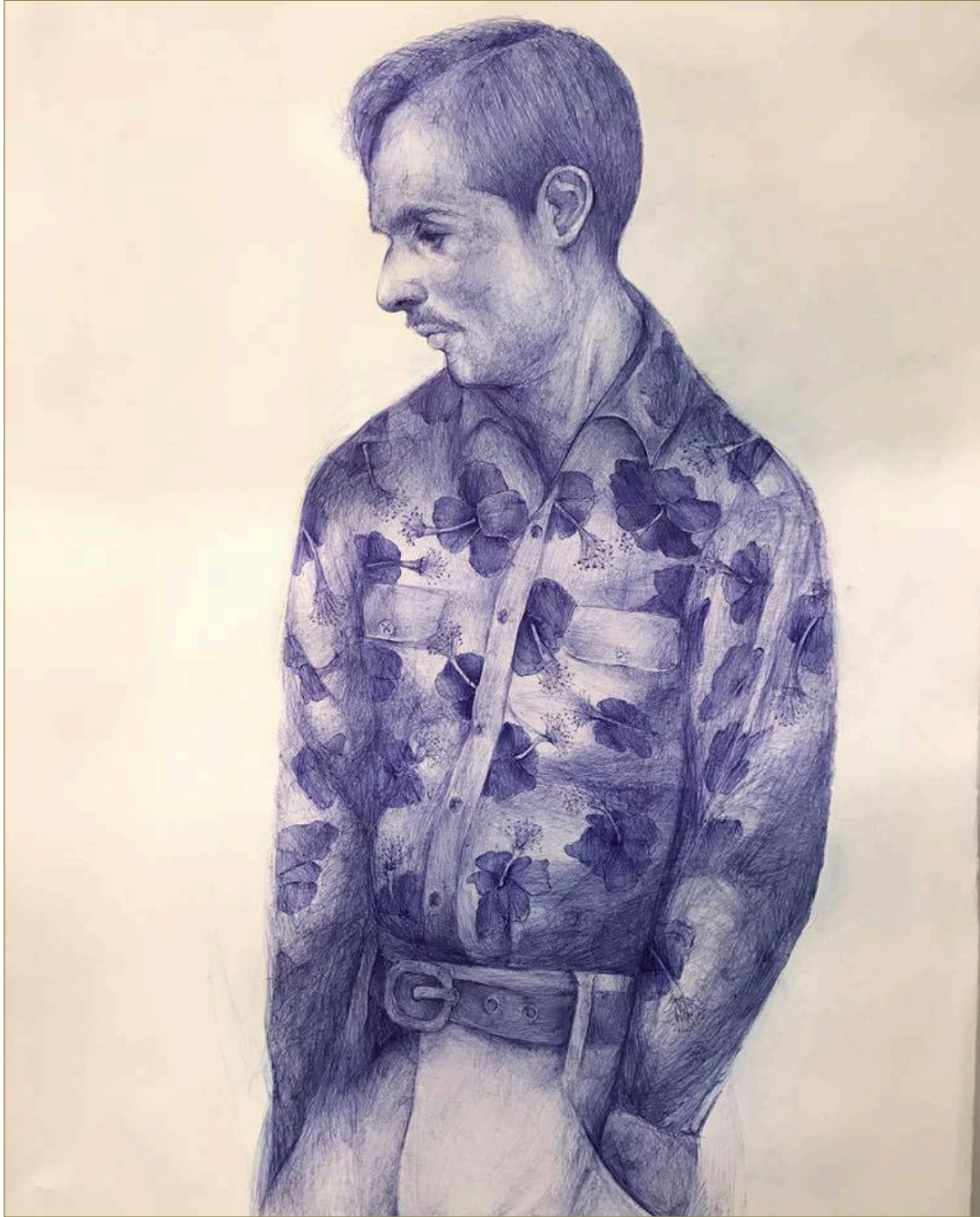


Image 6, The hibiscus and I, 36 by 48 Inches, 2017

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